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Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-eighth session,** the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Commission, for information, the report of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics, which reviews the activities undertaken and work accomplished by the Working Group in 2006-2007 and planned outputs and programme of work for 2008 and 2009. The Commission is requested to take note of the report.

* E/CN.3/2008/1.
** See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2007, Supplement No. 4* (E/2007/24), chap. I.A.

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Report of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics

I. Introduction

1. The main objective of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics is to firmly anchor environment statistics as part of official statistics by improving and strengthening basic environmental data, and thus to make an important contribution to the development of environmental indicators, indicators of sustainable development and integrated environmental and economic accounting.

2. The Working Group intends to accomplish this objective by enhancing inter-agency cooperation and by the pooling of knowledge bases and resources in the areas of methodological work, data collection and dissemination, training and capacity-building, and the organization of joint events.

3. At its thirty-seventh session, in March 2006, the Statistical Commission took note of the report of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics,[1] including its work programme.

4. The 2006-2007 work programme included the following activities:

(a) Methodological and harmonization work in the subject area of water through the Subgroup on Water Statistics;

(b) Revision of the United Nations Statistics Division *Glossary of Environment Statistics*[2] with a view to developing an inter-institutional glossary;

(c) Development of a proposal for harmonized metadata for environment statistics;

(d) Organization of joint training and capacity-building actions on the basis of the shared work programmes of the member organizations;

(e) Establishment of a subgroup on land use and land cover statistics for the discussion of methodological issues in this subject area and preparations for an international work session on land use and land cover statistics in 2007.

5. Section II of the present report describes the progress of work of the Working Group in 2006-2007 according to the areas mentioned in paragraph 2. Section III sets out the planned outputs and work programme of the Working Group in 2008-2009.

II. Progress of work of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics

A. Methodological work

6. In accordance with the work programme of the Working Group, the focus of methodological work in 2006 and 2007 remained on water statistics. This work was

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2006, Supplement No. 4* (E/2006/24).

[2] *Studies in Methods, No. 67* (United Nations publication, Sales No. 96.XVII.12).

carried out by the Subgroup on Water Statistics, which was established by the Working Group in 2005.

7. The Subgroup reviewed the questionnaires used by international organizations (the Statistical Division, Eurostat, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)) engaged in the collection of water statistics and worked out a comparison and concordance of the terms, definitions and classifications applied. The System of Environmental Economic Accounts for Water was used in the review as the reference framework. Lists of consistent and different terms were compiled and discussed electronically as well as at a meeting of the Subgroup in September 2006. The Statistical Division/United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and OECD/Eurostat questionnaires are being revised as part of the preparations for the 2008 data-collection cycle. The revision will improve consistency between the questionnaires as well as with the standard tables of the System of Environmental Economic Accounts for Water. Remaining inconsistencies, duplications and recommendations for harmonization are being discussed with FAO. The output of this work will be a consolidated list of terms and definitions, classifications, variables and indicators used in water statistics.

8. Work on the application of co-efficients to estimate water use and pollutant emissions, and also on water quality statistics, included the collection of national and international examples and practices. Those compilations, after critical review, will be made available on the Working Group's website.

9. The activities of the subgroup contribute to the ongoing work by the Statistical Division on the development of international recommendations for the compilation of water statistics and accounts.

10. At its sixth meeting, in June 2006, the Working Group agreed on the development of a joint glossary of environment statistics terms used in data collection. It was decided that the work would be implemented within the ongoing revision of the Statistical Division glossary of environment statistics. Four revised chapters of the glossary were circulated and later amended on the basis of comments received from members of the Working Group. Subsequent chapters will be made available for comments in December 2007. The work is expected to conclude in 2008 with the publication of the new joint glossary on the web.

11. The objective of the work on harmonized metadata guidelines for environment statistics is to develop a set of generic core metadata for easy dissemination and exchange of data, taking into account the special characteristics of environment statistics. A comparative analysis of existing metadata standards and those already implemented within partner organizations was carried out and a first draft proposal that also considered ongoing work on common standards for Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange was presented and discussed by the Working Group at its seventh meeting, in June 2007, and at a Eurostat meeting on water statistics in October 2007. A more elaborate proposal will be tested by the Subgroup on Water Statistics in 2008.

12. Due to other priorities and commitments, the establishment of the Subgroup on Land Use and Land Cover Statistics has been postponed to 2008.

B. Data collection

13. The 2006 data collection was implemented by the Statistical Division, OECD and Eurostat in a coordinated manner. The Statistical Division collaborated and shared data with the Economic Commission for Europe and the European Environment Agency in order to avoid duplication of data collection from countries for the Fourth Pan-European State of the Environment Report (the "Belgrade Assessment"). Data collection was jointly implemented by the Statistical Division and OECD in China within the framework of the country's environmental performance review. Data exchange agreements are in place with OECD and Eurostat and have been established with FAO.

14. At its seventh meeting in June 2007, the Working Group also agreed on coordination mechanisms for data-collection activities in 2008 in the countries that are covered by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership instrument. Further discussion is needed with OECD in order to coordinate data-collection activities in the countries that are covered by their accession and enhanced engagement programme.

15. The revision of the questionnaires for the 2008 data-collection cycle is under way. The Statistical Division will send out the joint questionnaire on environment statistics, developed with UNEP, at the end of March 2008. It is planned to circulate the OECD/Eurostat questionnaire to member countries of those organizations in May 2008 (exact time has to be confirmed).

C. Training and capacity-building

16. The Statistical Division, UNEP and the Economic Commission of Africa (ECA) co-organized a training workshop on environment statistics in Ethiopia in July 2007. FAO provided a resource person to the workshop. Another training workshop for the Economic Community of West African States region will be jointly organized by the Statistical Division and UNEP in March 2008. Resource persons from the Statistical Division contributed to workshops organized within the environmental component of MEDSTAT in 2006 and 2007. In 2008 and 2009, there will be further possibilities for collaboration in the European Neighbourhood Partnership countries in the east and south of Europe as well as in Africa.

D. Joint events

17. The international work session on methodological issues of land use and land cover statistics that was planned for 2007 had to be postponed, as the establishment of the subgroup was delayed (see para. 12) and joint work in this area has not yet started.

III. Work programme of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics in 2008-2009

18. In the biennium 2008-2009, the Working Group will focus on:

(a) Continuing methodological and harmonization work in the subject area of water through the Subgroup on Water Statistics and present the results in the form of technical documents that will be made available on the web;

(b) Continuing and finalizing work on the joint glossary of environment statistics and make the glossary available on the web;

(c) Continuing work on a proposal for harmonized metadata guidelines for environment statistics, testing the proposal for water statistics, finalizing the draft on the basis of the lessons learned and make the proposed guidelines available on the web;

(d) Setting up the subgroup, led by FAO, on land use and land cover statistics with a mandate and work programme in order to harmonize the classifications of land use and land cover, to develop a core set of variables and to compile best practices for data collection. The Working Group will reconsider the organization of a joint international work session on land use and land cover statistics after the establishment of the subgroup;

(e) Coordinating the implementation of the 2008 data collection and dissemination programme;

(f) Further developing the Working Group's website in order to make the work more transparent and the results widely available;

(g) Pooling resources by joint training and capacity-building actions in particular in the regions covered by ECA, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and in the European Neighbourhood Partnership countries on the basis of the shared work programmes of the member organizations.